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Vik, PM

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Authors	Vik, PM
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"The computer says no": the demise of the traditional bank manager and the depersonalisation of British banking, 1960-2010

This article examines the role of the British bank branch manager in the context of the transformation of banking since the 1980s and discusses its implications for British banking. The analysis was based on interviews with retired bank managers and suggests that they viewed their role as being was based on skill, authority and autonomy. The centralisation of authority and increasing targets deskilled and disempowered their profession. Drawing on Weber's theory of bureaucratisation, this article argues that the loss of agency of managers depersonalised service provision as they no longer could base their decisions on personal considerations.

Keywords: banking history; professions; management; organisational change; bureaucracy

The British bank branch manager has significantly influenced people's experiences of banking after WWII. He or she would interview people applying for loans and opening up accounts. The branch manager was generally seen as an important figure in the local community, sitting on parole committees and school boards.[1] The bank branch manager also epitomises the decline of traditional, community-based banking in popular culture through depictions in films, TV series and adverts. Yet, whilst the post-war changes in British banking have been extensively covered, in academic circles scant attention has been given to development of the role of the bank branch manager in the same period.

Instead, the business history of British banking has been predominantly written from an elite perspective. Historical accounts of banking tend to be macro-level accounts focusing on influential chief executives and chairmen, or drawing on formal bank documents and statistics.[2] Frontline, ordinary banking staff are often treated as faceless, inconsequential and passive bystanders. The studies that do focus on the experiences and views of customers and frontline staff are largely autobiographical or journalistic accounts.[3] The studies by McCabe,[4] and Knights and McCabe,[5] which explore the perspectives and experiences of bank staff to changing discourse, strategies and organisational structures, are notable exceptions to this. Additionally, the study by Halford, Savage and Witz draws on interviews with bank staff to analyse the evolving role of women in British banking.[6] It is argued that it is important to address this dearth in the academic research because understanding the judgements and behaviour of staff matter in two regards. First, frontline banking staff have historically exercised considerable discretion over service provision, especially business lending, even up until recently. In her study of the business lending decision-making by Scottish bank branch managers in the early 1990s, Fletcher found that the managers had a great deal of autonomy to make lending decisions.[7] Similarly, credit scoring was not used in enterprise lending by the UK clearing bank researched by Hughes in the late 1980s.[8] Second, workers can potentially affect the implementation and operation of formal systems. Based on the implementation of management strategies in a British financial services company, Storey argues that companies' search for management control over the workforce is constrained by workers' resistance.[9] Similarly, branch staff in a UK bank that centralised back-office operations into processing centres showed resistance against the process by encouraging customers to complain about the processing centres.[10]

This article addresses this dearth in the academic research in two ways. First, it analyses the development of the role of the bank branch manager amidst the transformation of British retail banking in the 1980s onwards. Second, it discusses the implications for the relationship between banks and their customers rooted in Max Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy. The original contribution of this article is in the conceptualisation and analysis of the depersonalisation of banking rooted in the agency, or loss of agency, exercised by the traditional gatekeeper to banking services: the bank branch manager. This is important because the standing and trustworthiness of banks has historically depended on their links to and perceived image in local communities.[11] At the same time, there have been a number of changes in banking that has reinforced their public perception as increasingly remote from communities including branch closures, call centres and remote banking.

The focus of the article is on retail banking, the delivery of financial services[12] directly to consumers in the form of households and small businesses, and on the role of the manager of the domestic retail branch. The British clearing banks dominated retail banking, especially banking and transaction services and SME lending. However, it is important to note that British banks also developed investment and retail banking operations abroad in the period in question. In 1974, the board of Midland agreed that priority should be given to increasing profits from and developing its international banking business.[13] Similarly, the share of the Barclays group assets in international banking stood at 42% in 1970 and 56% by 1980.[14] Indeed, it was only after the international debt crisis of the early 1980s that British banks, and especially Lloyds, started fully concentrating on domestic markets.[15]

The remainder of this article is organised into five sections. Section 2 outlines a conceptual framework in which the implications of developments in the role of the bank branch manager for bank-customer relationships are discussed. The framework is rooted in Weber's concepts of rationalisation, bureaucratisation and the dehumanisation of administration and decision-making. Section 3 details the methods and data used in the article. Section 4 provides an overview of the transformation of British banking since the 1980s. Drawing on the perspectives and experiences of the interviewees, Section 5 defines and discusses the core elements of the role and position of the bank branch manager, and Section 6 explores how the branch managers were affected by the changes in banking. Section 7 concludes and discusses the implications of the findings using Weber's theory of bureaucratisation and dehumanisation.

Weber, bureaucratisation and depersonalisation

Weber's thesis of bureaucratisation has been highly influential in organisational research on businesses and is considered by some as the father of organization theory.[16] It has been used to theorise how there is a strong drive towards homogenisation of sectors beyond market and efficiency through institutional isomorphism,[17] to argue that bureaucratisation and rationalisation manifests itself in contemporary society through the widespread adoption of the business model of the fast-food chain McDonald's,[18] to account for charismatic leadership in business organisations[19] as well as a plethora of empirical papers testing Weber's hypotheses.[20]

In this article, Weber's thesis of bureaucratisation is used to conceptualise and analyse the role of the bank branch manager in shaping customer experiences and perceptions of banking. Specifically, Weber's framework is used to conceptualise what is meant by personal and impersonal, and the role of agency in distinguishing between the two. It is important to note that there already is a literature on dehumanisation and numericalization but this primarily relates to the dehumanisation of work organisation and the relationship and interactions between managers and subordinates and colleagues.[21] Haslam distinguishes between animalistic, involving viewing other with contempt or disgust, and mechanistic dehumanization, which involves taking an indifferent, rational and objective orientation towards other people.[22] McCabe sees numericalization as an element of dehumanisation that 'is grounded in discourses and disciplines such as accounting, operations, technology and strategy.'[23]

To fully understand Weber's concepts of rationalisation and bureaucratisation, one needs to examine the intimately linked phenomenon of modern capitalism. Indeed, Weber developed his thesis of bureaucratisation to account for the development of modern capitalism in Europe, which he sees as distinct from elsewhere and at other times.[24] Weber sees rationalisation, bureaucratisation and capitalism as intimately linked. On the one hand, bureaucracy 'is fully developed...in the private economy only in the most advanced institutions of capitalism'.[25] Administrative tasks carried out by salaried workers is 'not only more precise but, in the last analysis, it is often cheaper than formally remunerated honorific service'.[26] On the other, capitalism is dependent on rationalisation as the rational pursuit of profit, through fixed capital and certainty of calculations, which depends on a calculable legal system and formal rules.[27] The uniqueness of modern capitalism in the West comes from its orientation towards 'instrumental rationality...that is, deliberate planning.'[28] Deliberate planning, in turn, requires predictability and calculability.

In Weber's ideal type model of bureaucratisation, which he sees as the main manifestation of Western capitalism, activities are distributed in a fixed way as official duties and there is a hierarchical organisation of offices and duties, whereby higher offices have authority over lower offices but in a stable way constrained by rules. Conversely, in non-bureaucratic administrations, functions and duties are linked to 'social, material, or honorific preferences and ranks.'[29] Bureaucratisation breaks with non-rational interpretation of law prevalent in non-bureaucratic forms of administration. Bureaucracy accompanies modern mass democracy in that it is linked to equality before the law and a rejection of the case-by-case approach to decision-making, which according to Weber is characterised by 'arbitrariness and lordly discretion.'[30] The impersonal and functional loyalty of administrative workers in bureaucratic administrations underpins the levelling of social differences and the move from case-to-case judgements to rule-bound impersonal decisions.

The essence of bureaucratisation is, according to Weber, that it dehumanises management and administration:

> Bureaucratization offers above all the optimum possibility for carrying through the principle of specializing administrative functions according to purely objective

> considerations... 'Objective' discharge of business primarily means a discharge of business according to *calculable rules* and 'without regard for persons'[31]

In non-bureaucratic entities, then, there is consideration for those persons who are directly or indirectly affected by or involved in the execution of tasks. On the one hand, it can involve concern for the person, such as his or her perceived character (e.g. industriousness, thriftiness etc.), perceived status or standing (e.g. class, profession etc.), appearance (e.g. physical traits, clothing etc.) or association (e.g. kinship or family ties, dependency relationships etc.). On the other, the consideration may be for the circumstances in which the person finds him or herself, such as plight, desperation, comfort or strength. The implication of such consideration is that people may act out of loyalty, fear, admiration or other feelings towards the individual or out of sympathy, pity, envy or empathy for the circumstances in which the person find him or herself. This means that it is possible to have decisions driven by solidarity, loyalty and compassion, but also of nepotism, discrimination and favouritism. This may apply even where one is judging seemingly objective aspects of a case such as capability and effectiveness. It opens up for exercising morality-driven judgements, including of propriety, thrift, and types of people and circumstances that are deserving and capable. Conversely, in bureaucracies such factors are taken into account only when concomitant with organisational objectives, in which case they would be defined in an objective and rational manner.

In turn, the ability to base decisions on personal considerations is premised on a certain level of discretion, the freedom and ability to use one's judgement, on part of the person executing the tasks and making the decisions. In bureaucracy, conversely, there is a uniform treatment of cases – based on Weber's emphasis on the levelling of social differences – and a standardised execution of tasks. The criteria on which decisions are made and tasks executed are uniform and calculable. Administration and decisions are rational in the sense that they are planned activities, or at least conducive to planning, to achieve organisational objectives.

Methodology and data

This article considers the development of the role of the manager of the domestic retail bank branch and the implications for banking using Weber's theory of bureaucratisation. The methodology applied to do this is based on an interpretivist approach. It is held that views and perceptions matter because they reveal meaning and contain important contextual information. Man, it is recognised, is self-conscious and acts accordingly. Within the interpretivist tradition, this study is rooted in subtle or analytical realism.[32] These forms of realism recognise the importance of perspectives of the researcher and the researched but do not subscribe to the view that everything is relative and that the researcher can make no credible claims as it is ultimately based on someone's interpretation.

The primary method of collecting data consisted of oral history interviews with bank branch managers. Oral history is defined as 'primary source material obtained by recording the spoken word – generally by means of planned, tape-recorded interviews – of persons deemed to harbor hitherto unavailable information worth preserving'.[33] Where possible the testimonies by branch managers were cross-referenced with archival material. However, visits to the archives of three of the banks in the study – Midland/HSBC, Lloyds and Barclays – revealed that there were few documents describing existing banking practices and reorganisations. Further, access was limited because of the 30-year embargo banks impose on access to documents held in their archives. Hence, existing academic and historical accounts of banking were used to a greater extent in corroborating and challenging the oral testimonies rather than archival material.

There are a number of limitations with the oral history interview. Oral history interviews are not considered to be reliable for developing a chronological account of events because it is dependent on recall and memory, how people remember and talk about past events is coloured by recent events, and interviewees may struggle to distinguish between their own experiences of events from those that they may have read about.[34] However, the oral history interview is in many ways ideal from a sociological point of view because it provides interpretation and perspectives of the branch managers. They may also reveal important aspects not captured in documents, such as how changes were perceived and viewed by staff and customers.

The interviews took the form of semi-structured face-to-face interviews with retired bank managers lasting between 50 minutes and two hours covering their career, changes in banking and how they experienced these changes. In total 32 interviews were conducted (Table 1).

[Insert table 1 here]

Out of the interviewees, 18 were from Midland Bank or HSBC, 10 were from Barclays, two were from Lloyds and the remaining two were from a smaller bank outside of the Big Four (Barclays, Lloyds, NatWest and HSBC) and a building society. Twenty-five of the interviewees were former bank branch managers, whilst one was a branch manager of a building society. With two exceptions, all the branch managers were male. Seven of the bank branch managers worked for Barclays, 16 Midland or HSBC and two from Lloyds and a smaller bank. The interviewees constituted a self-selecting sample responding to calls issued in the retirement magazines of Barclays and HSBC, whilst five of interviewees were recruited through friends and acquaintances.

The majority were employees of Barclays and Midland Bank and none from NatWest. Consequently there is a geographical predominance in the Midlands, the heartland of

Midland Bank. As such the findings cannot be generalised to the population of bank branch managers or banks. Instead the intention is to develop a rich and holistic account of the role of the bank branch manager identifying lessons and implications for similar settings. In addition to issues of the representativeness of the interviewees, it is important to note that the bank branch manager represents a partial and slanted view of developments in banking.

The sampling strategy was designed to produce a sample containing the experiences of branch managers from across the different banks operating in Britain. However, it is important to note that the aim was not to produce a sample that was representative to draw inferences for a wider population of branch managers. The recruitment of interviewees continued until it had produced a solid understanding of what was going on and the researcher felt confident that an explanation could be generated. Mason refers to this as the 'theory-saturation point.' It was driven by a desire to understand a process rather than represent a population in some probabilistic manner.[35]

The transformation of British banking

The banking sector into which the interviewees entered (mostly) in the 1950s and 1960s was seen as uncompetitive, inefficient and conservative.[36] Banks did not disclose profits, interest rates were set by cartels and there was very little competition across different market segments, including mortgages, savings, bank accounts, business loans and consumer credit.[37] They were conservative and patriarchal institutions.[38] Although banks hired a large and growing proportion of female workers, it was a male-dominated work environment where only men had any realistic prospects of promotion beyond clerical roles.[39] Banks acted as the prudent and paternalistic custodians of the money of middle and upper class households.[40] As late as in the early 1970s, only about two fifths of adults had a current account compared with over 90% today.[41] The Big Four British clearing banks had large branch networks peaking at over 11,000 branches in 1978, which they used to compete for retail deposits and customers.[42] In part because of the lack of competitive pressures on costs, banking was highly labour intensive.

The branch was the ’foundation stone for retail banking’ gathering intelligence on local markets and customers, processing and settling the day’s business, and serving as a gateway for accessing services.[43] The structure of the branches managed by the interviewees would have remained largely unchanged until the 1980s and 1990s. Bank branches were autonomous determining access to financial services and underwriting, originating and monitoring services within certain limits and controls. Branches offered a limited range of financial services, namely bank accounts, cheques, credit cards, cheque guarantee cards, business loans and, after the secondary banking crisis in the early 1970s, hire purchase and other forms of consumer finance. There were very few centrally designed and determined services.[44] The income of the branch was generated from fees for banking and transaction services, and business lending.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the culmination of a range of political, societal, cultural, economic and technological factors led to the transformation of British branch banking. From offering a small range of financial services to middle class customers and businesses through their branch networks, British banks turned into

> financial conglomerates, participating in investment and merchant banking business with the corporate sector and international banking business, on the one hand, and providing a whole array of retail financial services through financial supermarkets on the other[45]

There were two key developments driving the transformation of banking. First, there was a change in the way in the regulation of financial markets. Banks were pressurised to disclose profits, the interest rate cartels abolished, asset restrictions lifted and barriers between different markets eased. These changes led to an intensification of competition between financial institutions that had previously operated in separate markets,[46] the emergence of price competition[47] and the diversification of the services offered by banks and other providers. It should be noted that the extent to which these changes led to increased competition is highly contested, with some authors suggesting that banks became financial oligarchies at a competitive advantage due to implicit public insurance.[48] The so-called Big Bang, a series of changes to the Stock Exchange introduced in 1986, allowed banks to enter into capital markets in a major way.[49] Second, there was an increasing demand for financial services among the UK population.[50] The rising demand was driven by the emergence of consumer society, rising incomes, electronic payment of wages and increased rates of homeownership.[51] Further, Leyshon and Thrift argue that the international debt crisis encouraged the UK financial institutions to focus on developed economy markets, thus fuelling a massive growth in the domestic consumer market in the 1980s.[52]

In the context of these changes, British banks implemented a number of changes to the retail banking operations. Banks increasingly sought to centralise and automate back-office operations to reduce costs,[53] ease physical overcrowding on branches[54] and deal with the growing number of customers and transactions.[55] This process started already in the mid-1960s to mid-70s with the automation of transaction and financial records.[56] Midland Bank extended mechanised book-keeping to all branches in the late 1950s and embarked on a computerisation of a number of branch operations, including cheque clearing and standing orders, in the 1960s.[57] This automation of internal processes in the 1950s and 60s combined with product innovation led to the creation of electronic fund transfer systems in the 70s and 80s and ATMs were a key element in expanding these.[58] The literature suggests that this process accelerated in the 1980s and 90s. Storey et al note that in the 1990s there was a trend among British banks centralising back-office operations into processing centres.[59] In their study of business process reengineering in a medium-sized UK bank, Knights and McCabe found that technological advances in online customer databases and communications enabled the bank to centralise and restructure its operations removing all non-sales activities from branches in the late 1980s and early 90s.[60] In another study, McCabe found that a major British retail bank centralised all back-office operations into seven processing centres.[61]

In tandem with the centralisation of the centralisation of back-office operations, there was an increasing emphasis on sales in branches. The remaining branch staff were increasingly focused on sales.[62] The process of centralisation involved a fundamental change in how the bank conducted its business with a greater focus on sales.[63] To encourage this shift, British banks started introducing performance-related pay widely in the 1990s with pay raises depending on performance ratings.[64] According to Storey et al, Coop operated with performance management approach for all staff, whilst Lloyds and Abbey National operated with performance-related pay in the 1990s.[65] The testimonies by the branch managers support this as they report that targets were being scaled up and intensified considerably in the late 1980s and 90s.

In the 1990s, British banks sought to further rationalise the branch network through outright branch closures and by clustering branches under a single management structure. Between 1983 and 1989 the number of bank branches fell from 36,788 to 34,535.[66] Between 1995 and 2003, British banks and converted building societies closed 22% and 19% of their branches.[67] Before merging with Lloyds in 1995, TSB grouped its branches into clusters of 8-10 under a senior manager and transferred its back-office operations to processing centres leading to a loss of 2,000 managers.[68] Sub-branches were not a new concept in banking as banks had operated with these throughout their history.[69] However, the large-scale downgrading of full-service branches to sub-branches on a systematic basis to rationalise the branch network was a new development. Midland embarked on a similar strategy in the early

1990s, whilst Barclays centralised later but to a greater degree.[70] Lloyds ‘embarked on a radical plan to reduce its head count and change jobs, while rationalizing its branch network following its merger with TSB.’[71] In Scotland, RBS ’created a system of group offices to deal with business customers’ in 1992, which was implemented largely in cities.[72] Credit scoring facilitated the concentration of decision-making in a few branches by reducing the need for technical capacity at branch level.[73] First used in the mail order industry in the 1970s, credit scoring was not introduced extensively in retail banking until the 1980s when decision-making in consumer lending was transferred to centralised processing centres.[74] In the US, credit scoring industry emerged in the late 1950s with the pioneering work by Fair, Isaac and Company Incorporated.[75]

The role of the bank branch manager

The vast majority of the managers interviewed entered banking between the mid to late 1950s and late 1960s, early 1970s during a period of large-scale recruitment into the sector. Most of them entered banking around the age of 16 or 17 on completing O-levels or equivalent degree, as indeed is the case for the sector more broadly. The respondents started in junior clerical positions and worked their way through senior clerk through to branch manager and or in some cases regional management. Typically the interviewees moved from junior clerk to cashiering and securities to senior clerk before promotion to branch or assistant branch manager. Branch positions tended to be interspersed with positions within lending control at regional offices or inspection teams. The moves were determined by the banks based on their needs and their assessment of the skills and qualities of the employees. Importantly, the interviewees saw the bank career as a route to progression through to white-collar profession and social mobility, as many of them came from working class backgrounds. As suggested by the quote above, it was often parents and family members that recognised the opportunity the banking career represented:

> My father was a baker's rounds man delivering to people's doors. I think his idea was he wanted me to do something better than he'd been able to do… He was of the opinion, because he was out in all weathers, he delivered bread when it was pouring with rain, snow on the ground or whatever it might be, whereas he thought probably that I ought to be indoors somewhere. So I think generally it was probably his wish and perhaps mine that you want to try to do a bit better than what dad did and so that's how finance came along.
> William, branch manager, Barclays, mid to late 80s

The role of the bank branch manager was largely focused on business lending. Business lending was the main generator of income as well as an aspect over which managers had some influence. In the absence of price competition, there was limited scope to compete with other banks over personal customers. Business lending was a source of considerable status for the bank branch managers. According to the interviewees, the amount of lending the managers could underwrite reflected the trust placed in them by their employer, as suggested by the quote below:

> I was given a personal lending authority of £100,000. So, in other words, I could see a customer, I could lend up to £100,000 without having to go anywhere else for approval, and at that time in [East Midlands town] there was [a number of other banks] and I could lend £100,000 and the nearest to me was [name other bank] and he could lend £30,000, but only if it was credit scored
> Jonathan, branch manager, Midland/HSBC, early to mid-00s

Moreover, lending was seen as a main pathway for promotion. Management roles at and above branch level were largely focused on lending and lending control. Conversely the loss of such authority was seen as a blemish on someone's career, as it essentially meant that the person had made poor or fraudulent lending decisions:

> I mean we used to have a phrase 'transfer to duties where his signature is no longer required.' It was a circular that came out every day, which listed all the appointments. 'Mr Smith has gone to Brown's branch and Mr Brown's gone and then you find so and so branch, Mr Smith has been transferred to duties where his signature is no longer required.' Having your signature cancelled was very serious, because you're back to being, as you say, a clerk in a back office. If you worked in one of the head office departments, like coupon office, that's because you besmirched your career
> Martin, branch manager, Midland/HSBC, late-80s to early 90s

The role of the bank branch manager was seen as successfully balancing the needs and demands of staff, customers and the bank. Although making a profit for the bank was ultimately seen as the main objective, it was felt that this had to be balanced with the needs of the staff and the customers. In particular, serving long-term needs of customers important to underpin the long-term viability of the branch:

> So that was the objective of the exercise, to be there for the long term with customers and give them advice that would be good for them for the long term. Not just a quick fix. I'll lend the money today and get the benefit of the interest rate and it'll sort itself out, probably, in a few years' time.
> Barry, branch manager, Barclays, early 80s to mid-90s

The interviewees identified three elements as important in fulfilling the role as the bank branch manager. First, the manager had to serve as the figurehead of the bank and be seen by the local community as acting on behalf of the bank:

> Well, you were very much the figurehead, the representative of the bank in the district… I think we still had a certain standing and we were expected to belong to the local rotary club and the chamber of trade and perhaps the golf club or whatever it might be. The function of the manager was, as I said, to be the focal point in people's mind of the branch.
> Robin, branch manager, Barclays, mid 70s to late 80s

Presence in community forums and organisations, such as business roundtables, rotary clubs and boards of charitable organisations and schools, was seen as important to convey this message. This is corroborated by Savage et al who argue that from the late nineteenth century through to the 1960s, employees of Lloyds Bank were encouraged to maintain the bank's local reputation by participating in local status community.[76] For the most part, the branch managers interviewed engaged with the local professional and business community with the purpose of acquiring new business and local market intelligence used in underwriting.

Second, the branch manager had to have the authority and autonomy to make decisions on behalf of bank. This largely, though not exclusively, centred on discretion in lending. Provided the branch was profitable and run properly, the managers reported enjoying a relatively high level of autonomy. The make-up of the portfolio and the activities of the branch were left at the discretion of the managers as illustrated by the quote below:

> I: When you came to [market town in Midlands] [early 80s], there wasn't, sort of, like, this is what we expect you to do, these and these areas and this is something about things you are expected to do?
>
> R: No. Just develop the business, Barry… Yeah. We expect you to do well. We think you can do well. Good luck. And that was it… I was left to my own devices how I developed the business. Whether I looked to lend more money or get credit balances or sell insurance
> Barry, branch manager, Barclays, early 80s to mid-90s

Third, the branch manager had to have the skills to exercise such authority. Part of this arose from formal training, especially the Institute of Banker's exams, which was a prerequisite for promotion beyond senior clerical roles.[77] Such training provided technical and codifiable skills, including valuing of assets, budgeting and cash flow projections. Additionally there were tacit and soft skills, which were perceived to be a combination of innate skills and skills acquired through ongoing practice, partly under the tutelage of a more experience manager. This is akin to craftsmanship in the sense that it is based on ongoing practice and apprenticeship.[78] There was a sense that the skills could only be acquired over time and relatively slowly. People could not simply be parachuted into branch management positions on the back of a graduate training programme:

> In the old days, you were brought through the tradition of banking and you went through the ranks. Each branch had its own full process and therefore you'd have a junior. I'll always remember the first job I had was to stick stamps on envelopes and write the address on the envelopes. And so early banking, and we were trained in traditional ways of banking. You'd go through the different stages, becoming a cashier, and then you went on to qualify.
> Matthew, branch manager, Midland/HSBC, early 80s to mid-90s

As suggested by the quote above, there was a sense among the interviewees that one had to have experience of all aspects of the branch to manage it in an effective manner.

The demise of the traditional bank branch manager

As discussed above, a multitude of developments were afoot since the late 1980s affecting the nature of the banking sector in which the interviewees were working in a number of ways. But how did branch managers experience them at the time and what did they see as the most significant developments for themselves and their profession? The experiences, impact and views of these developments among the branch managers interviewed were complex and multifaceted. Some were largely unaffected by the changes because they left banking before they were implemented or were too senior by the time of their introduction. Others were made redundant, changed career paths or took early retirement. Similarly, there were managers that saw developments as inevitable and sensible, whilst others questioned if they were beneficial for customers and more effective. In particular, there was disagreement about if the judgement and experience of branch managers was more reliable in the underwriting of business loans compared with credit scored lending. Nevertheless, they all thought that the developments affected the bank branch manager profession in a profound way. Of the numerous developments in banking detailed above, three were felt to especially affect the interviewees and their profession more generally: the centralisation of lending and administration in large branches or processing centres, the introduction of business credit scoring, and the increased focus on sales and the intensification of targets. These are now discussed in turn.

The branch managers thought that, over time, the centralisation of lending and administration undermined role of branches as gateways for services. As account administration was done elsewhere, the branch and its manager could not address problems associated with customer accounts weakening the link between branches and its customers.[79] It also eroded the traditional career pathway, as there were fewer entry-level and management positions at branch-level.[80] The centralisation of decision-making, especially concerning business lending, through grouping branches or establishing specialist business lending centres enabled the removal of the branch manager and replacement by clerical staff:

> It was a way of taking managers out of the branches and in their place were people who were appointed clerks
> Marcus, branch manager, Midland/HSBC, late 80s to early 90s

Managers of affected branches were transferred into specialist centres, made redundant or given early retirement and were replaced by senior clerical staff or assistant managers.[81] The centralisation of lending profoundly the branch manager’s role:

> 1980 through to 1983, the bank was reorganising the whole network…lending was taken out of branches and this is a significant change for you. Lending was taken out of branches and centralised in an area office. You left the branch manager there, but he only did very small personal lending and take operational responsibility. You deskilled his job. That, I think, was significant.

Martin, branch manager, Midland/HSBC, late 80s to early 90s

The removal of responsibility for business lending was crucial given its historically important role in the activities of the branch manager. As much of the perceived skills and experience of the branch managers lay in business lending, its removal signified a significant downgrading and deskilling of their role. Ultimately, with the development of new technology, many interviewees recognised, there was no longer a need for managers in small branches:

> It was part of the reorganisation. Basically cutting costs by taking managers out of branches and because of computerisation…now technology was really taking over and computerisation was coming in place, which is a great aid to the manager… All this information was there by the click of your fingers… You didn't need managers in situ in small branches lending small amounts of money. They might have been great characters in the town but they were a great cost and a lot of this could now be done by computerisation.
>
> Brian, branch manager, Barclays, early 80s to mid-90s

The interviewees noted the introduction of credit scoring, especially for business lending, as another important development affecting branch managers. Credit scoring was being introduced into British banks in the 1980s and 1990s to reduce costs, cope with greater number of customers, to improve the quality of lending and reduce bad debts.[82] The loan interview was blamed for many of the poor lending decisions increasing bad debts in the 1980s and 1990s.[83] The interviewees reported that credit scoring was introduced gradually starting with personal and then small business lending. Initially it was also advisory and branch managers could override decisions, but then it became increasingly difficult to override. Edelman reported this to be the case for Bank of Scotland as well.[84]

Generally the interviewees viewed credit scoring for personal lending as a necessity and furthermore did not perceive this as a threat to their role as this largely focused on business lending. Some also recognised that credit scoring enabled managers to spend more time on other aspects and that it proved more accurate in predicting lending outcomes than branch managers. However, most interviewees objected to underwriting business loans through credit scoring on a number of accounts. They felt that it undermined their judgement and the importance of tacit knowledge. They feared that it would lead to poor lending decisions:

> But business lending is definitely a much finer art and I defy anyone to say that it can be done on a pure credit scoring basis.
> Sean, branch manager, other bank, mid-80s to late 90s

Additionally, it was pointed out that credit scoring jeopardised branch managers' relationship with customers. On the one hand, it could mean end of long-term customer relations. On the other, it prevented managers from protecting customers from themselves:

> On the personal side we started credit scoring personal loans in 1982-ish, I think… And I got told off for overriding some of the credit scoring positives… For the personal lendings and saying…we know this chap's history, we've looked at it. We don't think, you know, he can afford this. Think this might be too much of a burden for him… I was told that's not relevant. I mean, the bank actually said that.
> Barry, branch manager, Barclays, early 80s to mid-90s

Indeed, the willingness of banks to lend, especially to small businesses, was a recurring theme of numerous Parliamentary enquiries during the 20th century since the 1931 Macmillan Committee report concluded that there was a financing gap for companies seeking finance of up to £200,000.[85] There have been resurging debates since then about if banks have been sufficiently supportive of small businesses. Credit scoring removed responsibility for customer outcomes away from managers and protected them from consequences of default:

> And if the loan went into default, you were, sort of, from the branch point of view you were protected because it was credit scored and it passed the credit score at the time.
> Laurence, branch manager, Midland/HSBC, early 90s to early 00s

This was also the case in a Bank of Scotland subsidiary introducing credit scoring in the 1980s, where the transferral of responsibility for lending outcomes was highlighted by the bank as a major selling point vis-à-vis employees.[86]

Finally, the interviewees identified the introduction and extension of targets as a significant development for their profession. Performance targets were brought in from the 1980s to replace the previous loose focus on profit, costs and performance. Although not directly removing discretion, they were aimed at curtailing the autonomy of branch managers. As with credit scoring, the interviews suggest that they were introduced gradually. There were initially few, flexible targets not linked to performance and the banks had no real infrastructure or staff dedicated to monitor and enforce them. Then, in the 1990s, interviewees reported that there was an escalation of the targets regime. The number of targets increased and many were linked to the growth in ancillary services. They were increasingly sophisticated, allowing for the detailed capturing of information about staff activities and contribution to profits, and were linked to pay. The targets were also monitored with increased intensity and frequency, as per the quote below:

> The area director, I'd have him probably on the telephone almost every day saying, right what's going on. What are you selling? What's going well? What's not going well? What are you doing about it?
> Sean, branch manager, other bank, mid-80s to late 90s

The experiences of targets did differ. Some valued them in managing staff performance and did not have any issues meeting them. However, most thought that the early targets were acceptable and appropriate but that the intensification of the target regime and its perceived inflexibility were highly problematic for three reasons. First, it signalled the lack of trust in branch managers' ability to do job, thus compromising their role as representative for bank in local community. Second, they felt it pressurised branch managers into making poor lending decisions and abandoning prudent lending practices because of emphasis on acquiring new business. Finally, some interviewees noted that it meant putting the interests of the bank above that of the duty of care towards the customer:

> the thing that really impressed on me when on my first lending course went, was…when you lend money you have a duty of care, obviously, to the bank to get the money back, but you have duty of care to the customer to only lend the money that is in their interest. If you lend somebody money just because they've asked for it and they can't pay it back you are not doing…him or her a favour. You have a duty of care to your customer. And that was starting to go… Instead of being the bank's representative passing down policy I was almost trying to shield the customers and the staff from what the bank was doing and it was frustrating fight. It was a losing battle because I was told that wasn't my job, to get on with it
>
> Harry, branch manager, Midland/HSBC, late 70s to late 90s

As suggested by the quote, the significance of the changes in banking was not merely about the impact on job descriptions and procedures. Rather, the interviewees thought that the changes were important because they perceived them to be part of a wider cultural change in banking, especially the abandonment of paternalism and conservative lending principles in favour of greater focus on sales and profit.

Conclusion

British banks underwent a transformation from the late 1980s onwards. From being a risk averse, conservative sector providing a handful of financial services largely to middle class customers through its extensive branch network, banks became global conglomerates providing a wide range of services to a mass consumer market through a number of channels, including telephone, Internet and branch. This article seeks to make a contribution to our understanding of this period through analysing the role and perspective of the bank branch manager, who found himself at the heart of this transformation.

The bank branch managers interviewed saw themselves as authoritative, and autonomous craftsmen using their skill, judgement and training to balance the perceived needs of the bank, its customers and staff. The discretion and expertise in business lending was especially important in terms of status and promotion. From the 1980s onwards, British banks introduced a number of changes that struck at the core of the professional identity and career of existing and aspiring bank branch managers at the time. The interviewees felt that their autonomy as branch managers was curtailed by the intensification of the targets regime in the 1980s and 1990s as targets became more numerous, more sophisticated and monitored with greater vigour. The authority of many branch managers was curtailed by the concentration of business lending discretion in dedicated lending units or in larger branches, and by the progressive introduction and extension of credit scoring. As alluded to by the phrase ‘computer says no’ in the title, the interviewees felt that these changes reduced the role of the bank branch manager to conveying automated or centrally made decisions to customers. These changes resulted in the deskilling of the branch manager by not involving him in the decision-making (underwriting and analysis) and disempowered the role by removing his ability to influence or perhaps even explain decisions.

On the one hand, these changes affected the bank branch manager as a profession. The findings presented in this article suggest that the changes in banking undermined the professional identity of branch managers through curbing and removing their autonomy and authority to make local decisions on behalf of bank. The transformation also led to a deterioration of career prospects for existing and aspiring branch managers. The demise of the traditional bank branch manager can be understood in the wider context of the disappearance of the generalist banking profession. According to Storey et al: 'The traditional rounded banker who was rotated through a wide range of general banking functions to gain the necessary experience for managerial position is now seen as an inappropriate model.'[87] Examining the restructuring of the branch network in a UK bank, Knights and McCabe argue that 'the restructuring involved a change in the "way of life" for branch staff and management, threatening their identity, social ties, job security, and their career promotion.'[88] The changes to the bank branch manager role and the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees of these should be understood in context cultural change in orientation towards sales, from paternalistic to performance-orientated staff management.[89]

On the other, the changes of the bank branch manager may have implications for the perceived impersonal nature of modern banking. The changes in banking undermined the authority and autonomy of the branch manager through centralisation of and the imposition of greater central control over local activities. At the heart Weber's thesis of bureaucratisation and dehumanisation is the removal of discretion to root out case-to-case judgements based on consideration of individuals affected by or involved in decision-making. This, in turn, is driven by rationalisation, the increasing orientation towards the execution of planned actions to achieve organisational objectives. Rationalisation drives depersonalisation as it encourages a move from a case-by-case approach with the opportunity to take emotional judgements about persons into account to a uniform treatment regardless of the person or his or her circumstances. The agency of frontline staff is crucial in personalising services because it allows them to give consideration for those involved and affected by decisions, including their person (i.e. perceived character, standing or association etc.) and the circumstances in which they find themselves. The implication of this is that decision-making may be driven by nepotism, discrimination or favouritism as well as solidarity, loyalty or compassion. The loss of agency for bank branch managers and its implications for the ability of branch managers to take human considerations is, therefore, a mechanism for depersonalising services. Hence, this concept complements the existing literature around dehumanisation, which has clarified different forms of dehumanisation and its cognitive underpinnings[90] and defined numericalization as ‘grounded in discourses and disciplines such as accounting, operations, technology and strategy.’[91] In particular, it identifies the agency, or more precisely its removal, as a potentially important mechanism in depersonalising service provision rather than technology per se. This may help explain the deterioration of levels of customer satisfaction and trust in banking, especially concerning customer complaints about the inflexibility or remoteness of banks.

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[1] Hughes, "The Changing Lending Role," 32

[2] See e.g. Capie and Rodrik-Bali, "Concentration in British Banking"; Collins, *Banks and Industrial Finance*; Hollow, "Strategic Inertia, Financial Fragility"; Holmes and Green, *Midland*, Rogers, *Big Four British Banks*, Billings and Capie, "Capital in British Banking"

[3] Drury, *A Banker's Account*; Lascelles, *Other People's Money*

[4] McCabe, "Enterprise contested"; McCabe, "Numericalizing the other"

[5] Knights and McCabe, "Life is but dream"; Knights and McCabe, "Ain't misbehaving"; Knights and McCabe, "Governing through teamwork"

[6] Halford, Savage and Witz, "Restructuring Organisations, Changing People"

[7] Fletcher, "Decision making", 50

[8] Hughes, "The Changing Lending Role," 40

[9] Storey, *Managerial prerogative*

[10] Knights and McCabe, "Life is but dream", 780-781

[11] Carruthers, "Sociology Credit and Money"; Collins, *Money and Banking,* 63; Savage, Stovel and Bearman, "Class Formation and Localism"

[12] Law, *Oxford Dictionary of Finance,* 168. Financial services are defined as: "Any good or service provided by a financial institution. Financial products include loans, mortgages, insurance policies, advice, derivatives, etc."

[13] Holmes and Green, *Midland*, 257

[14] Ackrill and Hannah, *Barclays*, 268

[15] Leyshon and Thrift, "Geographies of financial exclusion"; Rogers, *Big Four British Banks*

[16] Hinings and Greenwood, "Disconnects and Consequences", 411

[17] DiMaggio and Powell, "The iron cage revisited"

[18] Ritzer, "The McDonaldization of society"

[19] Milosevic and Bass, "Revisiting Weber's charismatic leadership"

[20] See e.g. Laing and Perrin, "Iron Cage of the Profession"; Souitaris, Zerbinati and Liu, "Which Iron Cage?"

[21] Haslam, "Dehumanization"; McCabe, "Numericalizing the other"

[22] Haslam "Dehumanization"

[23] McCabe, "Numericalizing the other", 2

[24] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*

[25] Ibid, 956

[26] Ibid, 973-974

[27] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*

[28] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 63

[29] Ibid, 983

[30] Ibid, 976

[31] Ibid, 975

[32] Altheide and Johnson, “Assessing interpretive validity”; Hammersley, “What’s wrong with ethnography”

[33] Definition by Louis Starr quoted in Seldon and Pappworth, “By Word of Mouth”, 234

[34] Seldon and Pappworth, “By Word of Mouth”

[35] Mason, “Qualitative researching”, p. 134

[36] National Board for Prices and Incomes, *Bank Charges*

[37] Collins, *Money and Banking*, 415-420; Howcroft and Lavis, *Retail banking*, 77

[38] Halford, Savage and Witz, “Restructuring Organisations, Changing People”, 77

[39] Booth, “Technical change in banking”; Halford, Savage and Witz, *Gender, Careers and Organisations*

[40] Halford, Savage and Witz, *Gender, Careers and Organisations*; Morgan and Sturdy, *Beyond Organizational Change*

[41] Ackrill and Hannah, *Barclays*, 248; Department for Work and Pension, *Family Resources Survey*, 36

[42] Burton, “Competition in the UK”, 574; Howcroft and Lavis, *Retail Banking*, 77

[43] Leyshon and Pollard, “Geographies of industrial convergence,” 205

[44] Ackrill and Hannah, *Barclays*

[45] Mullineux, *UK Banking After Regulation*, 115

[46] Gentle, *Financial Services Industry*; Mullineux, *UK Banking after Deregulation*

[47] Howcroft and Lavis, *Retail Banking*, 168-170

[48] Mullineux, “Banking for public good”

[49] Mullineux, *UK Banking After Regulation*, 115

[50] Ibid, 156-157

[51] Morgan and Sturdy, *Beyond Organizational Change*; Kempson, Whyley and Collard, *In or Out?*

[52] Leyshon and Thrift, “Geographies of financial exclusion”

[53] Howells, “Management and Hybridization,” 83

[54] Bátiz-Lazo, "Evolution of ATM Network," 5

[55] Bátiz-Lazo, "Evolution of ATM Network," 1-2; Booth, "Technical Change in Banking," 279

[56] Barras, "Interactive Innovation", 228

[57] Booth, "Technical Change in Banking," 280

[58] Bátiz-Lazo, "Evolution of ATM Network," 2

[59] Storey et al., "Changing employment practices", 140

[60] Knights and McCabe, "Life is but dream", 778

[61] McCabe, "Enterprise contested", 1559

[62] Storey et al., "Changing employment practices", 141

[63] Knights and McCabe, "Life is but dream", 779-80

[64] Storey et al., "Changing employment practices", 147

[65] Ibid, 138

[66] Howcroft, "Branch Networks", 26

[67] Leyshon, "Changing Geography", 12

[68] Storey et al., "Changing employment practices", 142

[69] Cameron, "England"; Collins and Baker, "Banks and Industrial Finance"

[70] Storey et al, "Changing employment practices", 142

[71] Ibid, 142

[72] Fletcher, "Decision making", p. 39

[73] Leyshon and Thrift, "Lists come alive"

[74] Wainwright, *Geographies of securitisation*

[75] Poon, "Scorecards for consumer credit"

[76] Savage, Stovel and Bearman, "Class Formation and Localism", 286

[77] Ackrill and Hannah, *Barclays*; Green, *Debtors to their Profession*

[78] Sennett, *The Craftsman*

[79] Knights and McCabe, "Life is but dream", 782

[80] Storey et al., "Changing employment practices"

[81] Ibid, 140-142

[82] Leyshon and Thrift, “Lists come alive”, 443; Edelman, “Introduction of credit scoring”, p. 162; Wainwright, *Geographies of securitisation*

[83] Leyshon and Thrift, “Lists Come Alive”, 443

[84] Edelman, “Introduction of Credit Scoring,”

[85] Collins, *Money and Banking*, 366

[86] Ibid, 170

[87] Storey et al., “Changing employment practices,” 143

[88] Knights and McCabe, “Life is but dream”, 780

[89] Halford, Savage and Witz, *Gender, Careers and Organisations*

[90] Haslam, “Dehumanization”

[91] McCabe, “Numericalizing the other”